



ADMINISTRATION ON AGING

Grandparents As Caregivers

The 1994 Census Bureau Report estimates that 3.7 million children live in a household headed by a grandparent. For almost 1.3 million children, a grandparent, often the grandmother, is their primary caregiver. This figure reflects an increase of 27 percent from the previous year in the number of children being raised by grandparents. Nearly 46 percent of these children are African American, almost 42 percent are Caucasian, and 12 percent are Hispanic.

In recognition of these dramatic numbers, the U.S. Administration on Aging (AoA) has included both the issues of grandparents raising grandchildren and caregiving in general as important components of its emphasis on home and community-based care services for families. If not for these grandparent caregivers and their critical care, millions of children would be denied the opportunity to grow up in stable homes and communities among their families and friends, with potentially tragic consequences.

Grandparents stepping in to raise grandchildren or other relatives is not a new concept. For decades, families in the United States, particularly in minority communities, have depended upon extended family arrangements for child-rearing and economic survival. These multigenerational and intergenerational family arrangements are very important in many cultures. However, it is the recent and unprecedented proliferation of grandparents who are involved in child-rearing in the United States that forces the nation to pay closer attention.

Data collected by the American Association of Retired Persons' Grandparent Information Center, from a sampling of 500 grandparent callers during a one-year period, indicated that 71 percent of grandparents are their grandchildren's permanent primary caregivers. The average age of the grandparents polled was 55, with

nearly 75 percent within the 50 to 70 age range. Forty-six percent of the grandparents reported living on a fixed income while caring for their grandchildren. The grandparents' reasons for stepping in to care for their grandchildren ranged from parental substance abuse, child abuse, neglect or abandonment to unemployment, divorce, AIDS and death.

Older persons raising grandchildren often face a myriad of challenges, such as their own declining health or the need to provide support to the absent parent of the grandchild. Other challenges some grandparents confront include lack of support and respite services, affordable housing and access to medical care, as well as other physical, emotional and family strains. In some cases, they may not have the financial resources to raise another family, or may use their savings or deplete their retirement funds in order to do so.

Over the years, realizing the crucial function of grandparents as caregivers in society, AoA has made provisions for programs supporting grandparents and promoting intergenerational and multigenerational understanding. These programs have been made available through the Older Americans Act's Title IV discretionary program. Two exemplary programs were administered through the New York City Department for the Aging and the Pennsylvania Department on Aging. New York's program focused on training older persons to provide support and assistance to the grandparent or relative caregiver, and Pennsylvania's program offered grandparents the opportunity to have their grandchildren immunized for free at senior centers in participating Pennsylvania counties.

AoA is not alone in recognizing the tremendous and unselfish contributions that grandparents make on a daily basis to keeping their families together. Across

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the United States, the aging network, aging and non-traditional aging organizations, the private sector, educational and religious institutions and the media are acknowledging the enormous role grandparents play in the lives of thousands of children. Public-private partnerships are forming at the local level to support grandparent-grandchildren families. Grandparents themselves are working together, learning from each other and, as consumers, becoming advocates for their own issues and concerns, empowering themselves to enhance the quality of life for their grandchildren.

In January 1995, President Clinton signed a formal proclamation declaring 1995 as the "Year of the Grandparent," recognizing the "extraordinary place that grandparents hold in our families and communities." Later in the year, at the historic 1995 White House Conference on Aging, the concerns faced by grandparent caregivers figured prominently. The 1995 White House Conference on Aging was the first of its kind to bring the concerns and issues of grandparent caregivers to the forefront through the unanimous adoption of two resolutions addressing the challenges they face. AoA, working with the aging network, is committed to implementing these important resolutions.

An important step in implementing one resolution was taken in November of 1996 when President Clinton, resuming a tradition begun in 1986, issued a formal proclamation designating the week of Thanksgiving as "National Family Caregivers Week." This proclamation calls attention to the contributions family caregivers make to their loved ones and society as a whole.

The challenges faced by grandparents who are raising their grandchildren can be daunting, but they are surmountable. It is important that society become increasingly aware of the importance of supporting grandparents who are caregivers. As President Clinton said during the "Year of the Grandparent" proclamation signing ceremony, "Despite (society's) many changes, grandparents remain a source of knowledge and stability in American families. Grandparents help us to understand the past and encourage us to hope for the future."

Where to Go for Help

Resources, which can be accessed through the national aging network, are available to support older persons who are serving as primary caregivers to their grandchildren or other younger family members. Headed by AoA, the network comprises AoA's regional offices; 57 State Units on Aging; more than 661 Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs); 222 tribal organizations, representing 300 tribes; and thousands of service providers, senior centers, caregivers and volunteers. Working in close partnership, the members of the aging network plan, coordinate and develop community-level systems of services designed to meet the unique needs of older persons.

For more information about AoA and the aging network, please contact:

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AoA also supports a nationwide toll-free information and assistance directory for older people and caregivers of all ages called the Eldercare Locator, which can provide the name and phone number of the AAA(s) nearest to the person needing assistance. The Eldercare Locator can be reached by dialing toll-free, 1-800-677-1116, Monday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m., Eastern Standard Time.